

Board of Selectmen review Board of Education Budget
February 12, 2014

Present: First Selectman Gayle Weinstein; Selectman David Muller; Selectman Dennis Tracey III; Town Administrator Tom Landry; Administrative Assistant Judy DeVito; Superintendent Dr. Colleen Palmer; Finance Director Dr. Joann Keating; Phil Schaefer, Chairman Board of Education, Members of the Board of Education, Administrator; residents and members of the press.

This meeting was recorded and videotaped. The tapes are available in the Selectmen's office. The meetings are available for viewing online via the Town's website.

Ms. Weinstein called the meeting to order at 7:30pm

Pledge of Allegiance- Ms. Weinstein led the meeting with the Pledge of Allegiance

Discussion regarding solar panels on school buildings- Mr. Tracey said he wanted to follow-up on a question that was asked about solar panels at speak-up which related to the apparent availability of a grant which was not being used by the school district. Dr. Palmer said the district has been aggressive in looking for green energy opportunities and energy savings, looking to reduce the budget and the burden of the budget on the tax payer. There was an opportunity that came along where by preferred rates of electricity would be offered.

The State of Connecticut incentivizes investors to invest in green energy on public property. The municipality has to decide is it worth the installations of the panels given all the other things that go with solar panels on your infrastructure. This would involve a lease that the Town would have to sign off on. They spent months on this, and last summer they were looking at the possibility of putting solar panels on three of the schools. As they got into the process there were some inconsistencies with some of the information they got back and they were trying to sort it out. Not only did they have to work through the contracts but it would have to go through the Town and their process. At the eleventh hour, at the beginning of the summer, it was also revealed to them that there was a miscommunication/misunderstanding on the timing. It was her impression that the panels would be on the roofs of the school for the start of the school year, but it was shared later that it was a nine week installation period.

The Town Building Committee through Mr. Landry asked them not to go ahead with the project at that time. She had further conversation with Allen Swerdlowe who had concerns about the long term impact of putting solar panels on the roofs of the school. There is a part of the contract where there is a person who will insure the integrity of the roof during this process. Every time you have penetration in a roof structure it's one more area of vulnerability. If you have water intrusion and all the other factors that go with that that is an issue. Mr. Swerdlowe was concerned about the ongoing maintenance and he would prefer that if a solar project were to go into place, the transfer station has five acres of open area and you can put a field of solar panels there so if there is any damage it doesn't intrude on the infrastructure of the district. They began to assess the cost benefit

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analysis which was what Allen Swerdlowe had encouraged them to look at. They stepped away from the project but they are still committed to green energy.

Mr. Muller asked if they were ever committed to doing anything, and is this dead. Dr. Palmer said that they were never committed to do anything. They never signed a contract, never made a commitment but spent a lot of time examining it. At this point it is not her intent to bring it forward.

Discussion regarding school facilities- Mr. Tracey wants to know the recommendation of the subcommittee and what the next steps are. Phil Schaefer said that they are not comfortable right now making a decision in the next year or so in terms of moving a full grade out of Hurlbutt and freeing up some space. The facilities committee is comfortable with offering additional space at South House for the Seniors and figure out more space for parking now. If they decide to move a grade out of North House then that is a possibility for farther expansion of Senior Center Space but until they know what the population is in the next year or two, they can't make a decision yet. As far as Board of Education offices, there was discussion in their facilities committee about moving certain offices into North House. Dr. Palmer said that they could give the Senior Center 18 more parking spaces if the Town were to build a new asphalt play area for the students, which would free up a parking lot behind East House.

Ms. Weinstein said she did not understand why they couldn't have East House. Dr. Palmer said she has tremendous concerns about the security at the back end of school. She would welcome that a formal risk assessment be done.

Ms. Weinstein said that she heard quite clearly from the Facilities Committee that the schools could not be the solution to the Town's problems" and that North House was off the table because they were concerned about giving up 50% of the classrooms. They were also concerned about having to build a new gym or add on to the multipurpose room because you would be losing the North house gym. Ellen Uzenoff said that what was said was North House was off the table for now pending the result of the study and the risk analysis. They also said it was totally appropriate to move some Board of Education offices into North House now because those functions, special education and technology, are already school centered. The two options that they were most comfortable with right now are option 2 and option 6, both of which allow the Senior Activities Center to stay at South House.

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Ms. Weinstein asked about the four students that are paying tuition to go to school in Weston. Dr Palmer said these are children that they have welcomed into the district. By word of mouth, there are several students who either went to a private K-8 school or were looking for a high school pathway and their parents said they would be willing to pay

tuition to Weston. When a student applies, it's like applying to a private school and the district has the right to say yes or no by student. The student must be in high academic standing, good attendance record, no major discipline problems and they feel that person would enrich their school. When they take a student in they are not hiring a new teacher, they are not bumping any of their students that live in Weston out of any opportunity.

Ms. Weinstein said it seems to her that she could live in Norwalk and pay less property tax, not have to pay Weston taxes and pay less than the per pupil cost that she's paying for her child to be in the Weston School System. Dr. Palmer said that the rate could be examined.

Mr. Tracey asked about enrollment projection and how they came up with the projection that first grade will increase by 11 students. Dr. Palmer said Nesdec does the projections and they do an analysis about points of entry per grade level. There are certain entry points where you will pick up students in your district.

Ms. Weinstein asked about reducing the number of buses. Joann said they would take a look at it again. Dr. Palmer said it is how many students do you load and how effectively do you get them from their homes to the school and then send them back out for the next tier of busing.

Ms. Weinstein said she had an issue with the class sizes in the Middle School, especially sixth grade where they are adding staff to reduce the class sizes. She said now is the time they need to adjust the whole model that they use as far as the teaming.

She also has issue with all the stipends that are paid to teachers and staff. This year's budget has over a million dollars in stipends. Mr. Muller said that last year they asked the question and they gave them numbers as to how much was going to staff versus parents and it was overwhelming to staff. Lewis Bray said that the specific stipends are negotiated stipends with the Weston Teachers Association and are part of the three year contract. It is bargaining unit work so they have to give it to a teacher if it is a qualified teacher who's interested. If a teacher isn't interested or qualified they use outside folks. In those situations they still must pay the stipend because otherwise you're using volunteers to perform Union work. This is standard practice with collective bargaining units. He said the Board does have the right to pursue the concept of not increasing stipends while increasing salaries.

Ms. Weinstein said one of her concerns is that the budget doesn't show the revenue offsets The Town Budget for every line item that we are using a revenue offset, shows it. There are revenues that they are taking in that aren't being shown explicitly in the Board of Education budget.

Ms. Weinstein said that one of the rooms that they collect an energy savings for is the multipurpose room and if we are going to pay ½ the charges for the room then we need to get ½ the credit for the energy fees.

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Ms. Weinstein said she will not vote in favor of the sound system upgrades. She did agree to put it through at the Capital Committee meeting but she thinks to spend \$25,000 for 12 events when the neighbors clearly said to us just turn the volume down, is not where she would put money. JoAnn said she will get the report to them so that they could see the impact that changing the sound system will have. Ms. Weinstein said that was find, but then she thinks that the Lights Committee should take on that cost.

Mr. Tracey said that they need clarification of the staff reduction.

The meeting adjourned at 10:35pm

Respectfully submitted

Judy M. DeVito
Administrative Assistant
Approved 5/15/14